

DID KUMĀRAGUPTA I ABDICATE?  
A STUDY OF THE NUMISMATIC AND EPIGRAPHIC DATA

There is a gold coin of Kumāragupta I in the collection of the British Museum, London which was procured from Mathura. Of the earliest scholars who studied this coin Vincent Smith designated it as 'Two Queens type' as he thought that the obverse scene on this coin depicts Kumāragupta flanked by his two queens<sup>1</sup>. But he was unable to bring out its significance as the circular legend on this coin was illegible. When John Allan published it in his *Catalogue of the Gupta coins*<sup>2</sup>, he agreed with Smith's interpretation of the obverse scene adding that the lady on the left looked quite foreign in her appearance and was like Minerva. He, however, designated it as 'Pratāpa type' on the basis of his reading of the reverse legend as *Śri Pratāpaḥ*. Beyond this nothing could be made from this solitary specimen of this type known till then.

The discovery of the Bayana hoard of the Gupta gold coins in 1946 brought to light eight more specimens of this type which were published by A.S. Altekar in the *Catalogue of the Coins in the Bayana Hoard*<sup>3</sup>, as well as volume ten of the *Journal of the*

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1. JRAS, 1889, p. 109.

2. CCGD.BM., pp. xcii and 87.

3. *Catalogue of the Gupta Gold Coins in the Bayana Hoard*, pp. cx-cxii and 303-06.

Numismatic Society of India<sup>4</sup>. Though the circular legend on the obverse still defied decipherment, a number of corrections were made in the description of these coins by Altekar. He pointed out that the obverse does not show Kumāragupta flanked by two ladies but the three figures consist of Kumāragupta in the dress of a monk in the centre flanked by another male in warrior's dress on his right and a lady in *vitarkamudrā* on his left. He also pointed out that the reverse legend is not *Śri Pratāpa* as read by Allan but *Apratighaḥ* and therefore labelled them as 'Apratigha type', a name which has stuck to them since then. This discovery has opened a floodgate of interpretations of this rather unique type of coins, but before we discuss them it is pertinent to describe it in detail.

The obverse of these coins depicts a male figure standing to front in the dress of a monk, wearing a long loose robe and a protuberance on his head (or hair tied in a knot), with his hands folded on chest in *jñānamudrā* attitude. On his right is another male figure<sup>5</sup> in the dress of a warrior, wearing helmet, left hand akimbo<sup>6</sup> and the right hand extended towards the central figure<sup>7</sup>, as if expressing ignorance or uncertainty about the subject being discussed. Behind the central figure is the Garuḍa standard on his right and a crescent on his left. On the left side of the central figure is depicted a lady wearing a *sārī* and jewelry with left hand akimbo and holding out right hand in the attitude of argumentation (*vitarkamudrā*). Between the central figure and the female on his left is the legend *Kumāra* written horizontally and placed vertically, letters running from top to bottom, where as on the right of the central

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4. Journal of the Numismatic Society of India, (JNSI), 10, p. 115.

5. Hoernle, Smith and Allan erroneously identified it as a figure of a lady.

6. Altekar thinks that the man is holding a shield in his left hand. His view has been accepted by almost all the scholars. But a careful examination of the coins shows that there is no shield in his hand which is akimbo and the position of his arm is such that altekar mistook it for a shield. S.V. Sohoni has rightly pointed out that why should a man hold a shield in his left hand when he has no weapon in his right hand, specially when the scene does not demand it. JNSI, 18, p. 59.

7. The Garuḍa-standard is not held by the man on the right side as Altekar thought but is behind the central figure and not in anyone's hand. This was the usual practice followed on the Gupta coins. cf. Archer type, Swordsman type of Kumāragupta I etc.

figure is written *guptaḥ* in the same manner but the letters running from bottom to top<sup>8</sup>. A long circular legend on margin is not clear.

The reverse of this type shows goddess Lakṣmī seated, facing, on a full-blown double petalled lotus, holding a lotus flower in her uplifted right hand and resting her left hand on knee; a border of dots;



symbol on left. The legend on the right side is *Apratighaḥ*<sup>9</sup>.

The central figure on the obverse is no doubt that of Kumāragupta I as it has been specifically labelled as such. The scene however, poses certain questions, which it is not easy to answer. For instance, why has Kumāragupta been shown in the dress of a monk? Who are the two other persons depicted on the obverse? These questions still defy a satisfactory explanation though many suggestions have been put forward. We have already referred to the views of Smith and Allan. A.F.R. Hoernle, who was the first scholar to write on this coin thought that it depicts the Buddha worshipped by two women<sup>10</sup>. V.V. Mirashi thought that the central figure is that of some sage, to whom Kumāragupta and his queen had gone for advice in the hour of some national calamity<sup>11</sup>. R.C. Majumdar opined that these figures represent Śiva flanked by Nandi and Pārvatī<sup>12</sup>. Ajit Ghosh has taken it as a representation of Kumāragupta being blessed by his parents<sup>13</sup>. The uncertainty about the correct interpretation is evident from the fact that S.V. Sohoni has changed his views about this type as many as three times. In 1943 he identified the figures on the obverse of these coins as those of Kārttikeya and his two wives<sup>14</sup> but changed his view in 1956 and described them as those of Kumāragupta flanked by sage Kāśyapa and his wife Aditi, who are shown blessing

8. R.C. Majumdar read the legend on the obverse as *Mihirakula* instead of *Kumāraguptaḥ* which is absolutely untenable. cf. JNSI, 12, p. 73.

9. Allan had read it as *Śrī Pratāpa*. Recently S.V. Sohoni has reiterated his view (JNSI, 23, p. 347) without any justification. After the discovery of eight coins of this type in the Bayana Hoard there is no place for any doubt in the reading *apratighaḥ*.

10. JASB, 1883, p. 144.

11. JNSI, 12, p. 69.

12. *Ibidem*, p. 73.

13. JNSI, 22, p. 180.

14. *Sachchidanand Sinha Commemoration Volume*, 1943, pp. 177-78.

the king before he set out to fight Tāraka<sup>15</sup>. Apparently not satisfied with this explanation he discarded it in 1961 in favour of a fresh interpretation and identified the scene on these coins as depicting Kumāragupta being blessed by Śrī and Pratāpa, the personifications of Lakṣmī, the goddess of fortune and valour<sup>16</sup>.

While editing the Catalogue of the coins in the Bayana hoard, A.S. Altekar expressed the view that the scene perhaps depicts the abdication of Kumāragupta I. He remarked, «We may, however, hazard a conjecture about the meaning of the obverse motif. The legend on the reverse usually bears a close connection with the motif of the obverse and refers to the principal figure occurring there. Here it is *apratigha* and means invincible. This may refer to the principal figure on the obverse side namely Kumāragupta. He, however, appears in non-regal dress and is seen folding his hands and the lady on the right is violently arguing with him. Can it be that the motif refers to the abdication of the king on religious grounds and the effort made by his queen and general or crown-prince to dissuade him? Kumāragupta was firm in his resolve and is therefore described on the reverse as invincible»<sup>17</sup>.

Ever since this observation of Altekar the idea of Kumāragupta's abdication has caught the imagination of various scholars like B.P. Sinha, S.K. Maity and S.R. Goyal. They have woven a web around it in an effort to prove their point and every thread of information has been pressed in to service in spite of some very cogent dissent. Thus B.P. Sinha<sup>18</sup> has referred to two stories contained in the *Kathāsarit-sāgara* of Somadeva and a Buddhist work *Candragarbhaparipṛcchā*. According to the first story there was a king Mahendrāditya who had a valiant son Vikramāditya. This Vikramāditya defeated the Mlecchas who were creating havoc on the earth. There after Mahendrāditya handed over the kingdom to his son and himself retired to Vārāṇasī along with his wife and ministers. The second story contained in the

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15. JNSI, 18, p. 61.

16. JNSI, 23, pp. 353-54.

17. *Catalogue of the Gupta Gold Coins in the Bayana Hoard*, p. cxii.

18. JNSI, 16, p. 210-14.

*Candragarbhapariṣcchā* is some what similar. It tells that the kingdom of one Mahendrasena was invaded by Yavanas, Pahlikas and Śakunas. Prince Duḥprasahahasta, son of Mahendrasena, defeated these enemies. On his return Mahendrasena crowned his son as the king and himself retired to religious life<sup>19</sup>. Sinha traces a kernel of historical truth in both these stories. He identifies Mahendrāditya and Mahendrasena with Kumāragupta I and Vikramāditya and Duḥprasahahasta with Skandagupta and argues that since the Hūṇas are known to have invaded Gupta empire in the last days of Kumāragupta's reign and were defeated by Skandagupta, they should be identified with the Mlecchas, Yavanas, Pahlikas and Śakunas of these stories, which according to him are corroborated by the evidence of the Apratigha type of coins. He has been followed by S.K. Maity<sup>20</sup> and S.R. Goyal<sup>21</sup> both of whom have advanced the same arguments as those of B.P. Sinha.

These arguments appear to be very forceful and seem to prove that Kumāragupta I had abdicated in favour of his son Skandagupta. This idea had been given by A.S. Altekar as a mere hypothesis and just one possible interpretation of the Apratigha coins, in the absence of a better one. A critical analysis of the whole data will show that the evidence cited by these scholars is not only inconclusive and uncorroborated but also contrary to the well established facts known from numismatic and epigraphical evidence.

Both the stories contained in the above mentioned works have no independent historical value and can not be accepted as having any bearing on the Gupta history unless proved otherwise by the evidence from other sources. In the story contained in the *Kathāsaritsāgara*, Vikramāditya is said to have destroyed all the barbarian tribes such as the Kāmbojas, Yavanas, Hūṇas, Tokharians and Persians. Though Skandagupta is known to have defeated the Hūṇas one can not equate

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19. The idea was first mooted by K.P. Jayaswal in his *Imperial History of India*, pp. 36-37.

20. *The Imperial Guptas and Their Times*, pp. 56-58. The view has been recently reiterated by him in his Presidential Address to the 74th Annual Conference of the Numismatic Society of India, pp. 13-14.

21. *A History of the Imperial Guptas*, pp. 268-70.

this single foreign people with the Kāmbojas, Yavanas, Tokharians and Persians. Likewise there are some important discrepancies between the account given in the *Candragarbhapariprcchā* and the known facts of the history of Gupta period. Mahendrasena is said to be a king of Kauśāmbī which was never the capital of the Guptas nor were any Pahlavas, Yavanas or Śakunas on the borders of the Gupta empire who could threaten an invasion of India at this time. Infact the very identity of Śakunas with any known tribes is problematical.

Coming to the interpretation of the Apratigha type of coins, there are some very serious objections which go against the theory of abdication of throne by Kumāragupta I. It is quite pertinent to ask if Kumāragupta had abdicated the throne who issued these coins? It could not have been Kumāragupta as he must have lost all imperial rights to issue any state currency as soon as he renounced the throne<sup>22</sup>. As an alternative one may try to explain these coins as commemorative issues of his successor but that also is ruled out, because notwithstanding the fact that there was no numismatic tradition amongst the Gupta rulers to issue commemorative coins, it is to be noted that had these been the issues of Skandagupta, he would have definitely given his own name on these coins as commemorator. Moreover the place, where the name of Kumāragupta is mentioned on the obverse, is always reserved for the name of the issuer on the Gupta coins.

In order to prove their point, the propounders of the theory of abdication try to argue that the scene on these coins merely shows that Kumāragupta was contemplating renunciation but had not actually abdicated as yet and his queen and the crown-prince are shown trying to dissuade him from his resolve. It must be remembered in this regard that even if there was any such controversy in the royal family, it was definitely not a thing to be depicted on the coins which were meant for circulation amongst public. Rather it would have been kept as a closely guarded secret of the state.

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22. M.C. Joshi has argued in his article on Apratigha in the JNSI, 21, pp. 34-36, that Kumāragupta had given up active role in the state and was no longer taking any interest in the military and political affairs of the empire and that the crown-prince was *de facto* ruler. But there was no scope for such an arrangement under the political institutions of the Gupta period, as the idea of *dvairājya* has always been alien to Indians.

In fact the advocates of this theory have not paid attention to the fact that there was no time between the reigns of Kumāragupta I and Skandagupta for the former to renounce the throne and hand over the authority to the latter, nor the political situation at that time warranted any such action on the part of the Gupta emperor. The last known date of Kumāragupta I is the Gupta year 135 from his silver coins<sup>23</sup> which means that he was ruling with full imperial authority till atleast A.D. 454. On the other hand the Junagadh rock inscription of Skandagupta shows that by August, A.D. 455 (*Prausthapada*, G.E. 136)<sup>24</sup>, the latter was not only on the Gupta throne but had already defeated his enemies and reorganised the state administration by appointing suitable provincial officers after a prolonged deliberation on the subject<sup>25</sup>. Thus in the short period between A.D. 454 and August 455 we are asked to believe that Kumāragupta laid down the sceptre, Skandagupta ascended the throne, defeated his enemies such as the Hūṇas and the Puṣyamitras and also reorganised the administration, which in all reasonableness looks to be impossible and is strongly contradicted by definite epigraphical evidence.

In Verse 6 of the Bhitari stone pillar inscription we are told that Skandagupta, «who had vanquished his enemies by the valour of his arms, when his father had reached the heaven, having firmly established the royal fortune of his dynasty – which had been ravished, approached his mother who had tears in her eyes on account of the complete satisfaction that victory had been attained, just as Kṛṣṇa who had slain his enemies, approached Devakī»<sup>26</sup>.

Since we find in this verse of the Bhitari inscription, the explicit statement, that Skandagupta conveyed the news of the victory to his mother, when his father had ascended to the heaven, there is no room left for the conjecture that Kumāragupta had abdicated in favour of

23. CCGD.BM., p. 107, plate XVIII, 1.

24. BHANDARKAR, D.R., CII, III, P. 301.

25. *Ibidem*, pp. 299-300.

26. *Pitari divam upete viplutām vaṇṣa-lakṣmīm bhuja-bala-vijit-ārīr=yyah pratiṣṭhāpya bhūyah / jītam=itī paritoṣān=mātaram sāsra-nettrām hata-ripur=iva Kṛṣṇo Devakīm=abhyupetaḥ //*

CII, III, p. 315. cf. 3rd verse of the Junagadh Rock Inscription, *ibidem*, p. 299.

his son when the latter was away fighting against the Hūṇas. He was simply no more on this earth. Otherwise Skandagupta who has been described as *piṭṛ-pāda-padmavartī*<sup>27</sup> – a constant attendant on the feet of his father, would have certainly first broken the news to his father rather than rush to somebody else.

The information provided by the Bhitari inscription, when interpreted along with that of the Junagadh rock inscription<sup>28</sup>, provides irrefutable evidence that the Gupta empire was invaded by the barbarious Hūṇas and the powerful Puṣyamitras in the last days of Kumāragupta's reign. Skandagupta was deputed to defeat these enemies, a task which he accomplished successfully. But by the time he returned victorious from the battle-field Kumāragupta had died. Skandagupta then ascended the throne sometime in A.D. 454-455. Not only that there was no time in this rapid sequence of events, in this hour of national calamity Kumāragupta could not have even thought of abdicating the throne.

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27. *CII*, III, p. 315, line 7.

28. *Ibidem*, p. 299f.